

Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks



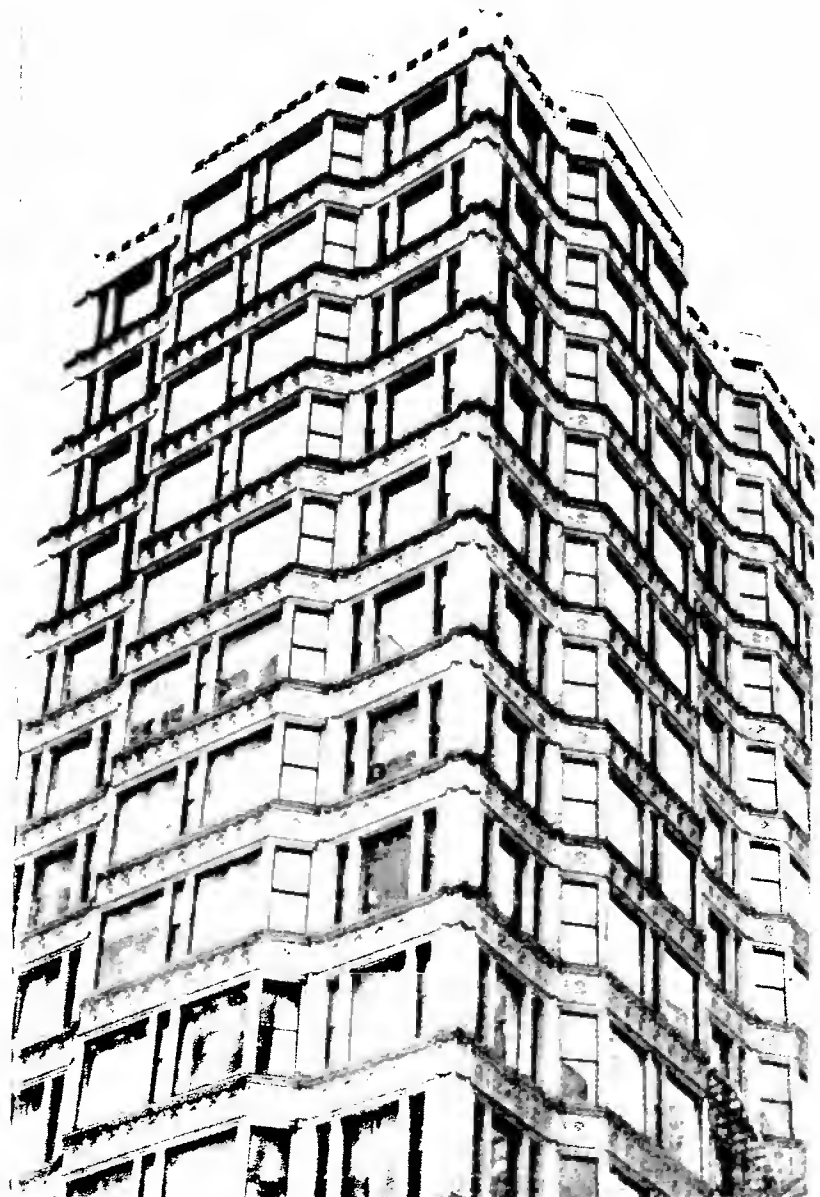
CITY OF CHICAGO
Jane M. Byrne, Mayor

COMMISSION ON CHICAGO HISTORICAL
AND ARCHITECTURAL LANDMARKS

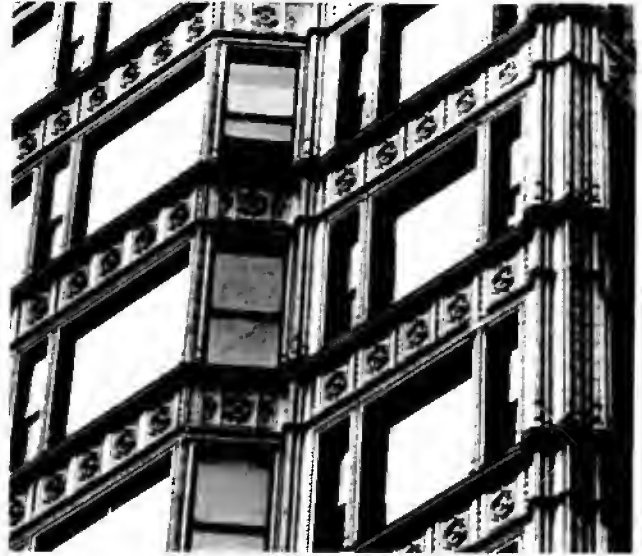
Ira J. Bach, Chairman
John W. Baird
Joseph Benson
Jerome R. Butler, Jr.
Ruth Moore Garbe
Martin R. Murphy
Harold K. Skramstad, Jr.

William M. McLenahan, Director
Room 800
320 North Clark Street
Chicago, Illinois 60610
(312) 744-3200

Printed U.S.A./December 1979



RELIANCE Building



32 North State Street
D. H. Burnham and Company, architects
Completed in 1894

The Reliance Building was designated a Chicago Landmark by the City Council of Chicago on July 11, 1975.

During the late nineteenth century, a new and primarily commercial architectural style evolved in Chicago, a style which later became known as the Chicago school. Of all the office buildings from this period, the Reliance represents the culmination in the development of the tall commercial structure. With walls almost entirely of glass, it is a pure expression of skeletal frame construction, anticipating by a generation the sheer glass facades of the modern buildings of the last sixty years.

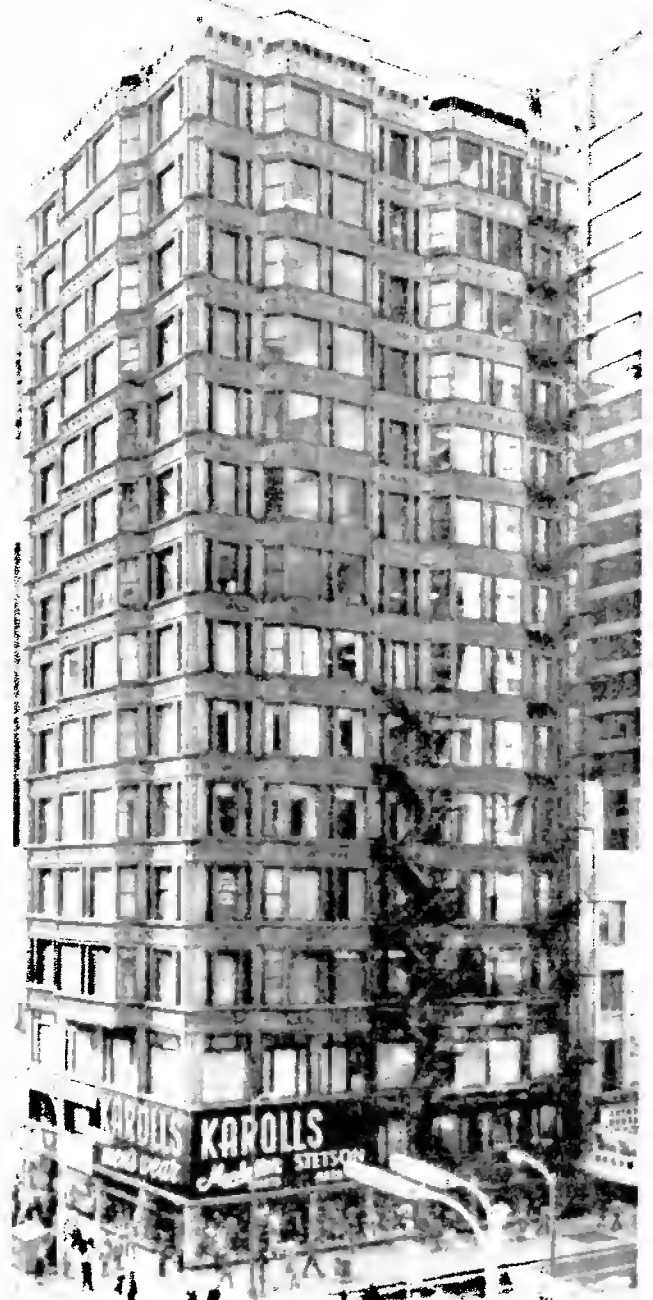
Linda Legner, project coordinator
John Hern, designer



The Reliance Building represents the culmination of the development of the tall commercial structure in the late nineteenth century. The openness of its walls was emphasized by the light-colored terra cotta that covered the structural elements. The ground floor was faced with red granite, and a flat cornice topped the structure. (Photograph courtesy Municipal Reference Library)

PRELIMINARY DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION

The first building on the site at the southwest corner of State and Washington streets was a five-story brick structure built by the First National Bank of Chicago in 1868. When the bank moved to new quarters at Dearborn and Monroe streets in 1882, William E. Hale bought the old bank building for \$225,000.



The Reliance Building has undergone changes through the years. The base has been radically altered, and the cornice was removed around 1948. Years of accumulated dirt have darkened the building but not obscured the essential elegance of the design. (Richard Nickel, photographer)

Hale hired the firm of Ackerman and Smith to remodel the building in 1885 although he recognized that the property would still be underdeveloped. By 1889, Hale had commissioned Burnham and Root to design a sixteen-story tower for the site. John Root undertook the design of the new structure, named the Reliance Building.

Hale, a close friend of Daniel Burnham, had for years manufactured hydraulic elevators, many of which were

supplied to Burnham and Root buildings. Yet even before the Chicago Fire of 1871, he had begun investing in speculative office space. He held shares in the Rialto, the Rookery, and the Insurance Exchange buildings, and in the Midland Hotel in Kansas City, all buildings from Burnham's office. He commissioned the firm as early as 1884 to design his Chicago home near 46th Street and Drexel Boulevard, and he established his own office in and became owner of Burnham's Calumet Building.

Although Hale was anxious to begin work on a new tower at State and Washington, he faced a crucial problem. Leases on the basement and first floor of the existing building expired in May, 1890, while leases on the upper stories ran until May, 1894. Hale's solution was to erect the new structure in two stages.

Construction commenced in 1890. The upper stories of the old bank building were supported on jackscrews so that the original ground floor could be demolished. When it was demolished, work began on the foundations which would later carry the high-rise tower. A new basement, ground floor, and mezzanine were also built during this first phase. Tenants in the upper stories reached their offices via temporary stairs and continued business as usual with relatively little interruption.

Effective May 1, 1890, Hale signed a lease for the soon-to-be-completed basement, ground floor, and mezzanine with Chas. Gossage & Co., a dry goods house. But before Gossage was scheduled to move in, the company was acquired by another dry goods firm, the rapidly expanding Carson Pirie & Company which became Carson Pirie Scott & Company the following year. When the lower level spaces were finished and available for occupancy on July 1, 1891, the new tenant was Carson Pirie Scott & Company.

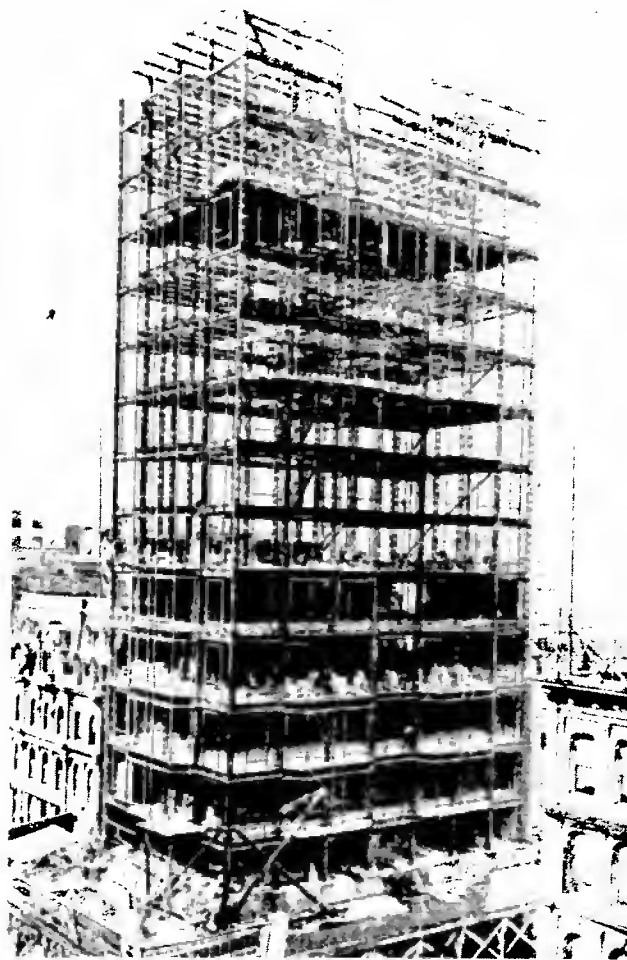
Carson's two-story quarters in the Reliance were opulent indeed, featuring mahogany woodwork, walls of English alabaster inlaid with gold and glass, marble mosaic floors, and ceiling paintings by artist William Pretyman. To bring natural illumination to the basement sales floor, Root had introduced a light well at the southwest corner of the building. The plate glass of the three upper bays was carried down to the well, and the sidewalks above the basement were paved with glass blocks. To further increase the level of illumination, the walls of the well were to be finished with white enameled brick.

John Root died in August, 1891, at the age of forty-one. Charles B. Atwood, an architect from New York, joined Burnham's staff and assumed the Reliance Building as one of his many responsibilities. With leases to expire in May, 1894, Atwood redesigned the upper stories, and construction for the second phase was soon underway. The remaining four floors of the old bank building were again put on jackscrews and Carson's space was temporarily roofed. The old building was then demolished, and thirteen new floors were added without significantly disturbing the retail store below.

The steel skeleton was erected with unusual swiftness, the top ten floors completed in just fifteen days. By November 8, the exterior envelope was finished. The upper office floors were occupied by January 1, 1895, and on March 15, Hale hosted a gala opening reception for his new commercial tower.

ROOT'S ORIGINAL PLANS

While several plans do exist for certain structural aspects of the lower levels, there seem to be no elevations to indicate Root's design for either the first two floors or any of the remaining upper stories. Drawings must have been prepared; loads had to be calculated, and Root's manner of working would not have permitted him to design the base without an idea of how he might resolve the rest of the building. While researching his 1973 book on the architecture of John Wellborn Root, historian Donald Hoffmann uncovered no drawings showing Root's intentions. Normally, design sketches would have been published in various professional journals during the first phase of construction, 1890-91. Hoffmann suggests that this was not necessary for a number of reasons.



Construction of the upper floors of the Reliance began in the summer of 1894. The steel framing for the top ten floors was erected in fifteen days, and in early November the exterior walls were completed.

(Photograph courtesy of The Art Institute of Chicago)

Overleaf: At the southwest corner of State and Washington streets, the Reliance is located amidst newer and taller structures which trace their origins back to the Reliance.

(Richard Nickel, photographer)



"Hale had no need to interest other investors; he was funding the project himself," Hoffmann writes:

He sold an old office block across State Street, and, before the second campaign [phase], sold the ground under the Reliance Building for \$480,000, then immediately leased it back at \$24,000 a year. In 1890, he had already leased the retail space for ten years and had nothing to gain from publicity five years before the office floors could be ready for lease. Finally, the "novel manner" of constructing a base for a skyscraper beneath an older building was, in Chicago, not a procedure so extraordinary as to cry for thorough reportage.

No drawings have been found to indicate Root's design for the exterior of the Reliance Building. After Root's death in 1891, Charles Atwood apparently redesigned the building. (Richard Nickel, photographer)



THE BUILDING

The Reliance is perhaps the ultimate refinement of the nineteenth-century skeletal frame skyscraper. Its soaring elevations are wrapped with little more than a thin skin of glass, making it the forerunner of the elegant buildings of the 1920s by European architects Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe.

There is some dispute over who actually designed the sleek shaft configuration. Whether Root or Atwood, the fact remains that the Reliance was the most advanced architectural expression of its time. Bands of broad windows are set in narrow spandrel panels, one atop another, to directly reveal the internal floor system, yet there is no exterior indication of the iron and steel frame underneath.

The windows are the most striking feature of the facade. They are fully developed "Chicago windows," in which a single large pane occupies the entire bay width except for a narrow sash that can be opened at the right and left sides. Not only does the Reliance exhibit an extraordinary amount of glass, but the windows are set nearly flush with the wall plane, so that the tower appears to be sealed with a transparent membrane.

Other buildings of the period also had projecting bay windows, but the Reliance displays a vibrant exterior of rippling glass that fills two full structural bays rather than just one. The bay windows extend the full height of the building and project three feet over the sidewalk line. Because the sash panels are located in the receding diagonal planes, windows admit light from three directions and catch breezes from two. The windows, which project no more than required to pick up light, are beautifully and totally integrated into the body of the building.

Without load-bearing vertical piers or columns on the exterior, all structural support is provided by the internal skeleton. This system carries the outer window walls as well as the floors and is contained entirely within the enclosing envelope. The building rests on spread foundations of steel beams and rails.

The frame includes an unusual two-story-high column (called a Gray column after its originator) which improved windbracing capabilities; simplified design; reduced shop drawing time; saved on steel; improved construction schedules; and provided continuous pipe space inside the column.

With the flexibility made possible by frame construction, the office floors are adaptable to a variety of floor plans. As a result, the interior space layouts have changed considerably over the years. Initially, the first floor was occupied by a single tenant, the next four stories were subdivided into large sales rooms, and all other floors were devoted to office suites with special accommodations made for physicians and dentists.

Root's original scheme specified red Scotch granite as facing for the base and upper stories. When Atwood took over as project architect, he left the granite of the base in place but redesigned the upper exterior in cream white, glazed terra cotta. Previously, Holabird and Roche had sheathed their 1894 Champlain Building in white terra cotta, but the cladding there was unglazed. The enameled terra cotta on the Reliance, therefore, was thought to be the most extensive and perfect use of the material anywhere.

The impervious facing made the facade "indestructible and as hard and smooth as any porcelain ware. It will be washed by every rainstorm and may if necessary be scrubbed like a dinner plate," according to an article in the *Chicago Economist* in 1894.

Because Root's exterior drawings have not been found, there is no way of knowing how he might have treated the elevations. Atwood chose to give the building a somewhat Gothic character, although the ornamental details do not obscure the precise organization of the facade. Atwood had the terra cotta molded into clustered colonettes which frame the windows, and he decorated the spandrels with quatrefoils (bas relief ornament with four foils or arcs) embracing rosette centers.

The handsome ornamental ironwork that distinguished

The facade of the Reliance is almost entirely of glass. Chicago windows, set flat with the surface plane or angled into a bay, are used on all upper floors. Terra cotta, with details of a somewhat

the interior was produced by the Winslow Bros. Company. The huge plate glass display windows of the ground floor were set in bronze frames that matched the detail of the entrance door. Columns throughout the building held bronze brackets for gas light fixtures; door plates were also of bronze. Wrought iron was used for the Gothic patterns found on the elevator cages. Cast iron with decoration in low relief was used for the vestibule mailbox and for all staircases and balustrades. The entryway and interior stair halls were surfaced with fine marbles and mahogany. The building was originally topped with a thin slab cornice which was removed sometime after 1948.

The Reliance was specifically designed as an investment office building and has continued as such throughout its lifetime. An elegant glass prism, the building is a triumph of

Gothic character, covers the spandrels, piers, and mullions. (Richard Nickel, photographer)



structure and the principles of Chicago school design. Its grace, transparency, and exquisite proportions transcend commercial necessity to become fine art.

THE ARCHITECTS

The firm of Burnham and Root was one of Chicago's leading architectural offices during the pre-eminence of the Chicago school. Their practice influenced architects in this city and elsewhere, not only by virtue of the quality of their buildings, but also through the extensive professional writing in which both men were engaged.

John Wellborn Root, born in Georgia in 1850, was a talented, prolific architect as well as an inventive engineer. He designed forty-four major buildings in the Chicago area alone and twenty-five in other cities across the United States. Throughout his career, he sought to advance an original and organic architecture that could be expressed without duplicating designs of the classical orders. John Root contributed to the philosophy of modern architecture and helped shape the aesthetic of an overwhelmingly technical discipline.

Daniel Burnham, born in New York state in 1846, was a businessman, a capable executive, and an almost irresistible salesman. He actively secured clients and was largely responsible for the rapid growth of the firm until Root's regrettably premature death in 1891.

Burnham and Root produced some of the nation's most renowned buildings: commercial structures like the Monadnock and the Rookery, hotels, churches, apartment buildings, schools, railway stations, and private residences. Though the firm existed only eighteen years, it was always a well-respected professional leader.

After Root died, the firm was known simply as D. H. Burnham. Within three months of Root's death, Charles B. Atwood entered the office as chief designer. Burnham described him as "very gentle, with an engaging manner and certainly he was a very great artist." Atwood alone designed over sixty of the buildings for the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 in addition to numerous other major commissions.

In 1894, the office was reorganized as D. H. Burnham & Company with four partners: Burnham, Atwood, Ernest Graham, and engineer E. C. Shankland who had worked for Burnham since 1888. The office was one of the largest in Chicago at the time; commissions were international in scope, and designs included the Railway Exchange Building and the Marshall Field & Company store in Chicago as well as the Flatiron Building in New York. As Burnham devoted increasing energy to city planning, the work of the firm became much more tied to classical rather than progressive expression.

Burnham died in 1912. Throughout his career he had attracted extraordinarily talented associates and some of the period's most sought-after commissions. The Reliance is without question one of the nineteenth century's most artistic achievements. It is daring in design and construction technique while solving completely utilitarian demands. The Reliance represents the best architectural thinking of its time, and it anticipated the designs of the future.

The Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks was established in 1968 by city ordinance, and was given the responsibility of recommending to the City Council that specific landmarks be preserved and protected by law. The ordinance states that the Commission, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, can recommend any area, building, structure, work of art, or other object that has sufficient historical, community, or other aesthetic value. Once the City Council acts on the Commission's recommendation and designates a Chicago Landmark, the ordinance provides for the preservation, protection, enhancement, rehabilitation, and perpetuation of that landmark. The Commission assists by carefully reviewing all applications for building permits pertaining to designated Chicago Landmarks. This insures that any proposed alteration does not detract from those qualities that caused the landmark to be designated.

The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council only after extensive study. As part of this study, the Commission staff prepares detailed documentation on each potential landmark. This public information brochure is a synopsis of various research materials compiled as part of the designation procedure.